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ABSTRACT

A committee comprised of five teachers from the Ann Arbor school system along with consultants from the University of Michigan's English Composition Board and the Director of Language Arts planned, administered, and evaluated an assessment of the writing of all 11th-grade students in the district. It was designed to reflect writing as process and to reflect the kind of writing students are most frequently asked to produce. The primary goal was to look at the effectiveness of the writing curriculum and most importantly to provide each faculty member with the opportunity to conduct a self-study of his/her teaching practices. To this end, teachers designed the prompt, the criteria, and the procedure for administering the assessment, and then scored each paper with a partner with whom they met to discuss and reach a consensus on discrepant scores. The result was a prompt that elicited writing from all but six of 1,054 students and gave teachers a much clearer sense of the range of student writing in the district and the standards that individuals and colleagues bring to that writing.
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The 1985 Ann Arbor Teachers' Writing Assessment

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Michigan School Testing
Conference, Ann Arbor, MI, February 25-26, 1986.

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The 1985 Ann Arbor Teachers' Writing Assessment

A committee comprised of five teachers from the Ann Arbor school system along with consultants from the University of Michigan's English Composition Board and our Director of Language Arts planned, administered, and evaluated an assessment of the writing of all 11th grade students in the district. It was designed to reflect writing as process and to reflect the kind of writing students are most frequently asked to produce. Our primary goal was to look at the effectiveness of our writing curriculum and most importantly to provide each faculty member with the opportunity to conduct a self-study of his/her teaching practices. To this end, teachers designed the prompt, criteria, the procedure for administering the assessment, and scored each paper with a partner with whom they met to discuss and reach a consensus on discrepant scores. The result was a prompt that elicited writing from all but six of one thousand and fifty-four students and teachers who came away with a much clearer sense of the range of student writing in the district and the standards that we as individuals and our colleagues bring to that writing.

Jean E. Long

The 1985 Ann Arbor Teachers' Writing Assessment

In order to look at our teaching of writing, the Ann Arbor Teachers' Writing Assessment Committee, made up of two teachers from each of our two large high schools and one from our alternative high school, with the help of our colleagues from the Ann Arbor Schools and the University of Michigan, planned, administered, and evaluated an assessment of the writing of all 11th grade students in the district. We met last summer with three of our colleagues from the University of Michigan and our Director of Language Arts to reflect on that experience and to prepare a report for the Ann Arbor Board of Education. Today, I would like to highlight some of the features that made this assessment particularly effective in meeting our goals.

First, I would like to say something about how Ann Arbor teachers teach writing. Since 1979 when we first came in contact with the idea of teaching writing as process through an English Composition Board Workshop at the University of Michigan, and through subsequent workshops, and inservice opportunities, we have committed ourselves to the notion that writing is done in stages and consequently should be taught that way. Thus, we stress prewriting activities which range from class discussion, note-taking, brain storming, listing, free associating, outlining, to reading, interviewing, viewing a film, or anything else that helps the writer focus his/her thoughts and provides content for his/her paper. The next step in the writing process is writing a draft of the paper in an attempt to select ideas and present them in some coherent form. The third step involves asking others to respond to this draft through discussion or written comments. These readers may be the writer's classmates, friends, family members, or teacher, and hopefully, he/she will select more than one reader. These readings will attend to the clarity, development, and support of the ideas presented. Then, the writer is ready to make another draft that incorporates suggested revisions and possibly also editing. By editing, we mean attending to spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and other surface errors which affect the paper's appearance and readability. The editing is placed at the end of the process so that attention to it will not interfere with or be substituted for rewriting that is necessary to produce a coherent and well supported paper. The number of drafts required depends on the needs of the writer.

Another important feature of our teaching of writing is attending to the context of the writing assignment. Professor van t'Hull from the University of Michigan's English Department introduced us to an acronym that helps in this effort. His MAPS had the following references: the M stands for the medium or form of the paper--personal essay, news article, short story, etc.; the A stands for the audience the student is writing to, namely, his best friend, his English teacher, people opposed to a particular issue, etc.; P stands for the purpose of the student's writing, for instance to persuade, to entertain, to inform, etc.; and S stands for the situation which gives rise to the writing, namely, an incident in school, an injustice that needs attention, or a hypothetical situation established by the teacher when giving the assignment. Thus, we teachers of writing see a given piece of writing as occurring in stages and as inextricably part of the context for which it is done and are committed to creating that awareness in our students. The committee believes that in so far as possible, our prompt and the process we used in administering the writing assessment reflect these teaching practices.

With these teaching practices in mind, we designed an assessment that would help us do a self-study of our effectiveness in teaching writing to adolescents. The goals of the assessment were: (1) to determine whether student writing

behaviors reflect teaching practice, (2) to provide each faculty member with the opportunity to conduct a self-study of his or her teaching practice and of the effectiveness of the writing curriculum, and (3) to assess how well our students write. The assessment per se took place over the space of a week. Teachers received written instructions on administering the assessment and discussed them at a department meeting well before the day set aside for pre-writing. Five days before the students were scheduled to write, all 11th grade English teachers engaged their students in prewriting activities of their own choosing that dealt with the general topic of unfairness. The teachers collected prewriting notes at the end of the hour, telling their students that they may have them back on the day of the assessment. We left four or five days between the pre-writing and the actual assessment because we had evidence when we tried out various prompts on sophomore and senior students that the thinking time in between made a difference in the quality of the written response. On the day of the assessment, students were given blue books and asked to write their names, i.d. numbers, class, and teacher on the front so that the scored papers could be returned to them. Those students who wanted their prewriting notes received them before they started writing. Then the students read the prompt/essay assignment and spent the class period responding to it in the blue book. Students were asked to attach their prewriting notes to the completed essay so we might see how many requested and used their prewriting. After the students responses were scored, they were returned to the teachers who in turn returned them to their students along with the names of the teachers who scored them, their scores on each of the three criteria, with the consensus scores where appropriate. Then, the teachers discussed the scoring procedure and the significance of the scores with their students, with several teachers using the scores on the assessment essay as a theme grade. Since the teachers had participated in the scoring they had a great deal to share with their students.

The reading of student papers was not only the high point of the assessment for the teachers involved but also enabled us to accomplish our most important goal--to give each teacher the opportunity to do a self study of his/her teaching practices and of the writing curriculum. Since we involved all of the English and Speech teachers from all three high schools in the reading, we needed to divide them into smaller groups that met on separate days in order to have enough substitutes to cover them. Each teacher was released for two full days--half the staff one week and the other half the following week. Teachers were asked to indicate their preference, particularly where conflicts with other commitments were involved. From that, our Director of Language Arts and Richard Brengel from University of Michigan's English Composition Board placed people in the schedule so as to have a fairly even distribution of teachers from all three schools in each group. Tom and Richard also selected and duplicated student responses, some of which provided interesting challenges for our criteria.

When the first group of ten met, each teacher was given a copy of the criteria, the prompt, and a packet of photocopied student responses and asked to read and score the first paper in the packet on a scale of one to four in each of three criteria: authenticity, focus/organization, and language/mechanics. Each teacher's scores were recorded on the chalkboard and then we discussed our reasons for assigning the scores we did and tried to reach a consensus on each score. This discussion challenged us to articulate our standards for good writing and to compare them with those of our colleagues. It also enabled us to see how many different readings one student paper could receive. The openness of the criteria encouraged this kind of discussion and made it fruitful. After we had read and scored several student responses together, we began scoring

papers individually. Each paper was read by two teachers who recorded their scores on a form that also gave them room to jot down reasons or questions. Then each teacher met with his/her partner to discuss discrepant scores and reach a consensus. These discussions, like the group discussions, forced us to examine our own criteria, our reading of a paper, and to see it through someone else's eyes. We spent the second day again reading and consulting, this time in a group of twenty, and finished the day with a luncheon at a local restaurant where we continued to discuss the issues that had arisen in those two days. At the end of the second session, teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire, and without fail, their comments were positive, frequently commenting that what they liked best about the experience was the opportunity to share ideas and concerns with colleagues.

Since the most important goal of our assessment was to provide each faculty member with an opportunity to conduct a self-study of his or her teaching practices and of the effectiveness of the writing curriculum, I will indicate how our procedures made that possible. The procedure we established and followed, namely, involving our colleagues in every step of the process, and more importantly in the scoring of student essays, provided us many opportunities to examine and modify our instruction. First, it involved every member of the high school English staff in all three high schools. We and our colleagues were involved in designing the prompt, the criteria, and in reading and scoring the student responses. Second, it provided the occasion for us to talk with our colleagues throughout the district about the evaluating of student writing, namely, through the two days each teacher devoted to the reading and scoring of students papers. Third, it provided a prompt, that is, a writing assignment to which all students wrote, that (1) we devised, wrote to, and discussed in department meetings, (2) reflected the writing process, and (3) elicited writing from all but six students in the district. Fourth, it provided criteria that reflected what we as a staff value in writing. Fifth, it provided a procedure for looking objectively at what we as teachers look for when reading a student paper, and for comparing our reading of a student paper with that of a colleagues. Sixth, it enabled each teacher to read a wide range of student writing, acquainting many of us with kinds of writing we do not ordinarily encounter in our classes, and giving us a better sense of the range of student skills and deficiencies across the district. It also enabled some of us to alter our expectations in light of what we saw. Seventh, it acknowledged and celebrated the complexity of the reading and writing process because each paper was evaluated on its own terms. We didn't ask ourselves, did this student organize his/her paper by stating a thesis in the introduction, three main points in the body, and a conclusion that placed the issue in a larger context. Instead, we asked ourselves did the organizational strategy the student used accomplish his purpose. If it worked, why criticize it? Finally, it enabled teachers to share what we had learned or reaffirmed or both with our students when we returned the student essays with the scores they received and the names of the teachers who scored them. Thus, the chief benefactors of this assessment were the teachers and their students which is certainly the goal, if not always the result, of every writing assessment.

Jean E. Long, Chairperson
Ann Arbor Teachers' Writing
Assessment Committee

WRITING ASSESSMENT PROMPT

"UNFAIRNESS"

"It's not fair!" At three we've all learned to say it and feel it. Think of your own life and some of the injustices you've experienced, seen, or heard about. To trigger your memory, consider such things as:

- incidents in a classroom or play ground
- relationships and conflicts in your family
- the many demands put upon you against your will and wishes
- the arenas of law, politics, and government
- the comfort and survival of the world.

Your purpose is To Explain to someone who does not know you Why you think the situation is unfair.

You may begin your essay with the words, "It's not fair....," and finish the sentence. Then go on and write your paper. Be sure you explain to your reader why you think the situation is unfair.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

ANN ARBOR WRITING ASSESSMENT: UNFAIRNESS

AUTHENTICITY/VOICE/ENGAGEMENT

- 4 - Expression strongly reflects the writer's emotional and/or intellectual involvement in the topic. Strongly engages the attention of the reader.
- 3 - The writer is engaged in the topic and engages the reader. (Writing is clear, direct.)
- 2 - Interested, not engaging, perfunctory.
- 1 - Writing seems to be a mechanical exercise. Marked by cliches, hazy generalizations, meaningless expressions.

FOCUS/ORGANIZATION/DEVELOPMENT

- 4 - Focuses on one main idea. Has clear beginning, middle, and end. Well organized and well developed through examples that give reasons for the unfairness.
- 3 - Focused and organized but may have a flaw in coherence or incomplete closure. Incomplete development. Explanation is strongly implicit.
- 2 - Lack of clear focus/organization/development. Narrative but no explanation.
- 1 - Disorganized. Undeveloped. Unconnected generalizations.

SENTENCE MECHANICS/LANGUAGE

- 4 - Few mechanical, usage or sentence errors. Language used with fluency and variety.
- 3 - Some minor mechanical usage or sentence errors. Language used competently to express ideas.
- 2 - Enough usage errors to attract attention away from content. Sentences understandable, but unconventional.
- 1 - Language and mechanical errors impair meaning.